



The 12-15 May 1975 Mayaguez Incident: A Reappraisal

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"The 12-15 May 1975 Mayaguez Incident: A Reappraisal"

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12:00 p.m.
Mershon Center
Room 120**

This lecture is open to the public. Lunch will be served to invited faculty and students who RSVP to Beth Russell, russell.16@osu.edu, no later than Wednesday, November 23 .

On 12 May 1975, the SS *Mayaguez* , an American-flagged container ship transiting the Gulf of Siam, was seized by forces of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge navy and the forty-man crew taken captive. Acting in response to orders from Commander-in-Chief Gerald Ford, US military forces were committed to recover the ship and crew and to engage in retaliatory bombing of targets on the Cambodian mainland. The result was the first helicopter assault operation in Air Force history, as USAF Special Operations and Combat Rescue H-53s inserted a reinforced rifle company of Marines on to Koh Tang, the small island where the *Mayaguez* 's crew was erroneously believed to be held.

By mid-morning on the 15th, the *Mayaguez* and her crew had been repatriated and the operation was hailed as a victory for the Ford administration. That notwithstanding, the Marines found themselves fighting a well-armed and determined foe who significantly outnumbered them and were extracted only well after dark and with great difficulty. The Ford administration's sanguine interpretation of the results to the contrary, the military personnel involved in the action considered it a failure -- indeed, a near-catastrophe tactically -- and a complete disaster in senior leadership and command and control. The failure prompted major interest in altering organizational structures within the Department of Defense, although no significant changes were embraced until the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986.

To determine whether or not the failures encountered in the *Mayaguez* /Koh Tang operation were caused by inherent structural organizational problems, the presenters -- an Air Force Special Operations MH-53J pilot, an Air Force Combat Rescue HH-60G pilot, an Army UH-60 pilot, and an Air Force Special Operations MC-130P pilot -- analyzed the incident by applying Jay Galbraith's Star Model, Bolman and Deal's Frames Model and Mintzberg's Five Types of Organizations. Although these models are typically used to analyze business processes, the presenters applied them to the operational military problems under consideration under the rubric of Organizational Theory. They discovered that Organizational Theory is applicable not only to business, but at least equally applicable to military matters in affording new perspectives on how to gain lessons from success and failure in the operational arena. Their presentation, using the factual framework from Ohio State Professor John Guilmartin's study, *A Very Short War: The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang* (1995), shows that these perspectives can be applied outside of operations to the highest levels of government, to include the Executive Level.